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ABSTRACT

It is easy for parents to feel that they have lost their influence over their children once children reach adolescence. Several organizations with different focuses but with the same goal of helping parents raise their teenagers banded together to develop this publication. Their message is that parents can do many things to foster their children's talents and skills while guiding them towards healthy development. Several ideas for parents are detailed that can help make a difference in the lives of their children. Some of the ideas include: (1) spend time with the children; (2) help teens gain a sense of self-confidence; (3) work with teens to set goals; (4) let teens know that education is valued highly; (5) stay involved in their children's schools; and (6) know where the children are and what they are doing at all times. A list of resources is included. (JDM)

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Parents Matter:
Tips for Raising Teenagers

CAMPAIGN FOR TOBACCO-FREE KIDS
NATIONAL CAMPAIGN AGAINST YOUTH VIOLENCE
NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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Parents Matter: Tips for Raising Teenagers

Being a parent is one of life's most challenging – and rewarding – responsibilities. But the parents of teenagers may have the toughest job around. Adolescence is the journey from childhood to adulthood, from relying mostly on the judgment of others to learning how to make responsible decisions independently. It can be a difficult transition for both teens and their parents, especially in a society in which young people are confronted daily with the serious risks that come with sex, violence, drugs, alcohol, smoking, and school failure – risks that science and common sense tell us are often related. Because the various risks teens face are so closely connected, so too are the solutions.

It's easy for parents of teens to believe that they've lost their influence over their kids once they reach adolescence. The power of peers and the media can seem overwhelming. But research and experience both make clear: parents *do* matter in the lives of their teens. Teenagers need support, guidance, and caring from their parents as much as younger children do. And teens themselves say they want to hear from their parents about the challenges they face growing up, even if they don't always act like it.

While each of the organizations that have helped develop this publication has a different focus, we offer many of the same messages to parents. Parents can do so much to foster their kids' talents and skills and guide them toward healthy development. Parents can also shape the communities their children grow up in. Whether you're concerned about drinking, drugs, violence, trouble in school, smoking, or sex (or all of the above), the best advice for parents is the same: stay closely connected to your teenage sons and daughters. The following ideas can help parents make a difference in the lives of their teens.

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Spend time with your children and teens.

Spend time with your kids, engaged in activities that suit their ages and interests. Shared experiences build a bank account of affection and trust that forms the basis for future communication. Eat together as often as you can. Meals are a great opportunity to talk about the day's events and to grow closer with your children. Use the time for conversation, not confrontation. Read, watch TV or movies, and surf the internet together. Exercise or play sports as a family. Get involved in community service with your kids.

Help teens gain a sense of self-confidence.

Self-confidence is earned, not given. Give kids opportunities to learn skills and gain confidence. Offer praise for jobs well done, accentuate the positive, emphasize the things your children do right. If they fall short, suggest ways to improve; don't criticize. Affection and respect will reinforce good behavior (and change bad) far more successfully than fear or embarrassment.

Encourage your teens to get involved in fun, safe, fulfilling activities.

Help your children to identify their strengths, talents, and interests and to find opportunities in which these assets can be developed. Encourage them to volunteer in the community, join a youth group, or participate in arts or sports. It'll give them a sense of accomplishment, connect them to positive peers and adult leaders, and – not least of all – keep them busy.

Help your teenagers set goals and understand that they have options for the future.

Help kids understand how the choices they make now can affect their whole lives. Introduce them to successful people in your community who can explain what it took to succeed. Teens with long-term goals for education or work will be less likely to compromise their futures by engaging in risky behavior.

Let your kids know that you value education highly.

Stay involved in your children's education and let them know it is important to you. Explain to them how their education will reward them later in life and why it is so important for them to take it seriously now. School failure is often a warning sign of other problems. If you notice a drop in performance, talk to your teen and his or her teachers immediately.

Stay involved with your teens' schools.

Parents are often very connected to their children's elementary schools but disengage as the kids get older. Try to stay involved right through middle and high school. Pay attention to the classes your teens are taking and the homework they are being assigned. Join the PTA or another parent organization. Volunteer to be a tutor, mentor, or guest lecturer. Meet your teens' principals, teachers, counselors, and coaches. Attend back-to-school nights, student exhibitions, plays, band and chorus recitals, and sporting events. If you don't show up, your kids will be the first to notice.

Know where your kids are and what they're doing.

Set clear rules for your kids about what they may do and with whom they may spend time, and talk to them about why these rules are important. Establish curfews and make unchaperoned parties off-limits. Make a special effort to know where your children and teens are on the weekends and after school, since those are the "danger zones" when unsupervised young people may have many opportunities to use drugs, commit crimes, and engage in other risky behavior. The goal is to be an attentive parent without being authoritarian. Remember, knowing where your kids are and what they're up to doesn't make you a nag; it makes you a caring parent.

Get to know your children's friends and their families.

Friends have a strong influence on each other, so it is important to get to know your children's friends and their parents. Much peer pressure is actually positive. Encourage your teens to hang out with healthy, positive friends. Welcome their friends into your home and talk with them openly.

Talk with your children early and often about the pressures of growing up and the risks they may encounter: sex, drugs, alcohol, smoking, and violence.

Although it may be difficult to initiate a conversation, start when your children are curious and begin to ask questions. Make it clear that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger, and anxiety, and talk with them about the appropriate ways to deal with troubling emotions. Make sure your kids know the dangers of tobacco, drugs and alcohol, and sex. Frequent communication on such issues should begin early in childhood and continue throughout adolescence, as questions and situations continue to change. Of course, with teens in particular, you may have to take the initiative in keeping communication going. Create an ongoing two-way dialogue by respectfully answering each question or topic thoughtfully. Talk *to* kids, not *at* them.

Be clear about your own values and attitudes.

Communicating with your children about difficult issues is most successful when you, as a parent, are certain about your own feelings. By being open and honest, you can express your values in a caring way. Many parents worry about seeming hypocritical, particularly if they engaged in risky behavior as teenagers themselves but are now urging their children to take a different path. While most teens have a very well-tuned "hypocrisy radar," they are often sophisticated enough to realize that, in this age of AIDS, automatic weapons, and other dangers, new standards are appropriate.

Set the right example.

Be a living day-to-day example of your values and standards. Show the compassion, honesty, discipline, and openness you want your children to have. If you abuse drugs or alcohol, know that your kids are watching and what they observe may undercut your good intentions to keep them substance-free. Don't smoke or allow smoking in your home. Model non-violent behavior. If you want young people to shun violence, you need to demonstrate how. Parents who are dating should know that their kids see what they do, not just hear what they say.

Pay attention to kids before they get into trouble.

Programs and support for teens in trouble are great, but all kids benefit from encouragement, attention, and support. Don't focus attention on them only when there's a problem. Let your kids know you are proud of them for doing the right thing – even when it seems like no big thing.

Watch for signs that your teenager needs help.

Learn the signs of drug and alcohol use, school failure, depression, and violence. Here are some clues to watch for: large amounts of time spent alone in isolation from family and friends, sudden changes in school performance, drastic mood swings or changes in behavior, lack of interest in hobbies or social and recreational activities, and changes in your child's peer group or separation from long-time friends. Don't be afraid to step in and seek outside help. Most communities have resources to help parents help their kids.

Make your home safe and teach your kids the importance of safety.

If you own guns, make sure that they are kept locked up. Don't bring illegal drugs into your home, and keep your liquor cabinet locked. Don't smoke around your kids or allow others to do so. Make sure your teens wear seatbelts, get good drivers' education, and know the danger of drinking and driving.

Know what your kids are watching, reading, and listening to.

It is your role as a parent to serve as a filter between the media and your child. Even teens need guidance to become educated media consumers. Watch television or listen to music with your children and help them understand the difference between real life and what gets portrayed in the media. Look for teachable moments; characters and stories shown in the media often provide opportunities for talking about issues that concern you or your children.

Get involved in your community.

Parents can make a real difference in the lives of their children and teens, but parents can't fix all the problems their kids face. Parents must get involved in changing the environment in which teens face tough challenges and choices. The more your community supports the positive development of teens, the easier it will be for you to do your job as a parent. Encourage schools and other organizations to adopt and enforce tobacco- and drug-free campuses. Advocate for teen-friendly and safe places that are drug-free, alcohol-free, and smoke-free. Join community organizations that promote policies to help kids, like restricting the marketing of tobacco to children or reducing community violence. Patronize businesses that promote healthy choices by teens. Help other teens in your community by becoming a mentor or employing teens at your place of work. Get involved with the youth group at your place of worship or local community center.

Resources:

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids
1707 L Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5469
www.tobaccofreekids.org

National Campaign Against Youth Violence
33 New Montgomery Street, 20th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94105-9781
(415) 512-4008
www.NoViolence.net

National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 478-8500
www.teenpregnancy.org

National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth
PO Box 13505
Silver Spring, MD 20911
(301) 608-8098
www.ncfy.com

For information on parenting skills and other ways to
raise a drug-free child, please visit www.theantidrug.com.
For printed or audiovisual materials, call the National Clearinghouse
for Alcohol and Drug Information at (800) 788-2800.